Supervision for consultants

Following on from their article about coaching supervision (*TJ* August 2010), **David Birch** and **Erik de Haan** argue that consulting supervision is a distinctive field in its own right, significantly different to coaching supervision and in some ways richer because of the additional layers of complexity

Organisation consultants have to work within an organisation while holding onto their outsider's perspective. Yet, as they engage with the client system, they gradually acquire an insider's perspective on the organisation's issues.

Such a stance of being an 'outsider within' is not straightforward at all and carries with it all sorts of temptations, risks and limitations[1]. On the one hand, there is a risk that staying overly analytical and detached may result in observations, ideas and solutions that are more relevant for the consultant – or for his previous clients – than for the case
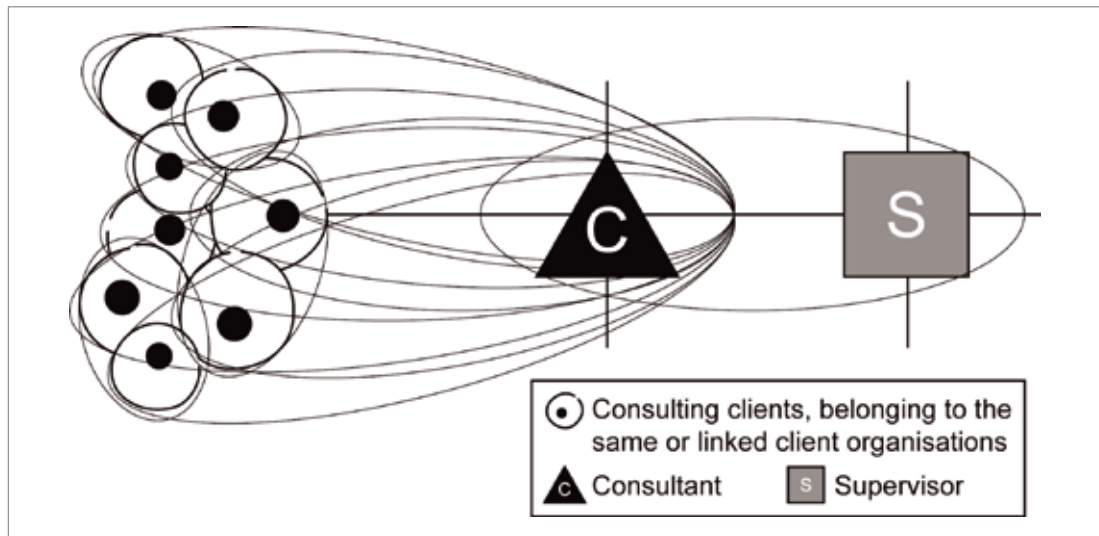
in point. On the other hand, consultants risk becoming over-involved if they identify too strongly with the organisation's agenda and issues, and can fall into the trap of trying to 'manage' the situation. One could call this the dilemma of 'aloofness *versus* collusion'.

Supervision helps consultants maintain a balance between these opposing risks and temptations. The supervisor stays – as much as possible – outside the client engagement, so he can freely observe, and comment on, what patterns or unconscious processes might be occurring within the client-consultant relationship.

Organisation consultants often experience anxiety and stress as they try to balance a very diverse

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portfolio with competing obligations to clients and colleagues. Supervision helps reduce the stress by helping the consultant reflect on, and understand, his own reactions and responses. The supervisor is in an ideal position to offer respectful feedback on a consultant's practice, based on an appreciation of the complexities and challenges that he faces.

The degree to which specific patterns are picked up depends on an aspect of personality called personal "valency"[2]. Valency refers to the way that individual supervisors or consultants will often respond to quite different unconscious patterns, depending on their personality and life experience. Some patterns are observable and in our conscious awareness. Other patterns are picked up unconsciously and somehow 'stir' us up, moving us emotionally in some way. Bion argues that this is because they remind us of patterns of relating from the past that we cannot quite allow ourselves to experience.

Thus an individual supervisor can pick up important determining patterns (such as blocks to change or opportunities for change) that are normally below the level of conscious awareness, but are within their specific and limited spectrum of valencies. This is comparable to the phenomenon of 'resonance' in physics, where an object can only pick up and amplify certain frequencies and not others.

Supervision modalities

The consulting supervisor and his supervisee can decide to work together in three different modalities. Each offers the potential for picking up organisational patterns. They are as follows:

Individual consulting supervision is focused on the individual consultant and his practice. The supervisor is not part of the organisational

system and is therefore well placed to attend to the interplay of 'transference'[3] between consultant-client relationships. Because the supervisor has no direct experience of the client environment, his impressions are shaped by the way the supervisee describes his work. By playing back what he is observing and how he is feeling, the supervisor is able to help supervisees explore assumptions and prejudices about their clients, their consulting practice and themselves.

Case example

Roger is a consultant working for a niche OD and executive education consultancy. The firm has five partners and 15 senior consultants. Roger is seen as someone with partner potential, although this has not been made explicit to him. In supervision, Roger talks about the dynamics within the firm, where the partners maintain an impression of always being in agreement. They meet every month and, although the whole firm knows when those meetings are, they don't know much about what is being discussed there. Roger regularly feels criticised by one of the partners, whereupon another partner stretches out a hand to comfort him. He also feels that he is in competition with one or two of the other senior consultants, who are similarly aspiring to partnership. The work with clients can be intense, but having to face these put-downs and rivalries in the firm is much harder for Roger. As an outsider, his supervisor 'holds up the mirror' in a way that helps Roger to appreciate his part in the dynamics more clearly. He learns how some of his own reactions are understandable in terms of his own family history, and from the fact that he feels quite exposed and vulnerable in the firm. Through his work in supervision, Roger manages to keep a steady course, not to escalate any of the tensions

too far, and eventually he is invited to join the partnership.

Compared to coaching supervision[4], individual consulting supervision (Fig. 1 left) affords greater scope for picking up patterns, as the consultant has been directly exposed to organisational dynamics and may even become relatively 'immersed' within the organisation under discussion.

Working as a *shadow consultant*[5] refers to supporting a consultancy project in an 'offline' supervisory role. Like *individual supervision*, there is no contact between the client organisation and the supervisor, who works 'in the shadow' of the consulting team, attending to the resonances within it as it works on the assignment. This system enables the supervisor to pick up still more patterns of transference/counter-transference, or what is often called the "parallel process"[6].

In this way of supervising, the supervisor is usually attached to a team of consultants working on a specific project but shadow consulting can also take place in mixed groups of consultants or within a consulting portfolio.

Case example
A shadow consultant was supervising a team of change consultants working at a financial services firm. As the team session progressed, she noticed that, whenever the project leader was speaking, her mind wandered. Even when she forced herself to listen, she was only able to follow what he was saying for a few minutes. When others in the team spoke, she found it easier to concentrate. When the same thing happened during the next session, she decided to share her experience with the group tentatively, wondering whether this might be a reflection of their work with the organisation in some way. Several team members admitted that they too found it hard to follow their project leader's thought process. The leader was initially embarrassed but, with the help of the group, came to realise that his key client, the CEO, also struggled to communicate with his team. The supervisor pointed out that this was a classic example of a parallel process, in other words a replication of what was happening in the client system. The supervisor then helped the team think through how this insight might also be relevant to the CEO. This resulted in a profound shift in the team's effectiveness, as they learned to share what might have been construed as critical feedback.

In shadow consulting (Fig. 2 below), the supervisor is exposed to a more complex dynamic than in one-to-one supervision. In our experience, dynamics between consultants working in teams may reflect, or mirror, strong and unconscious organisational dynamics[7].
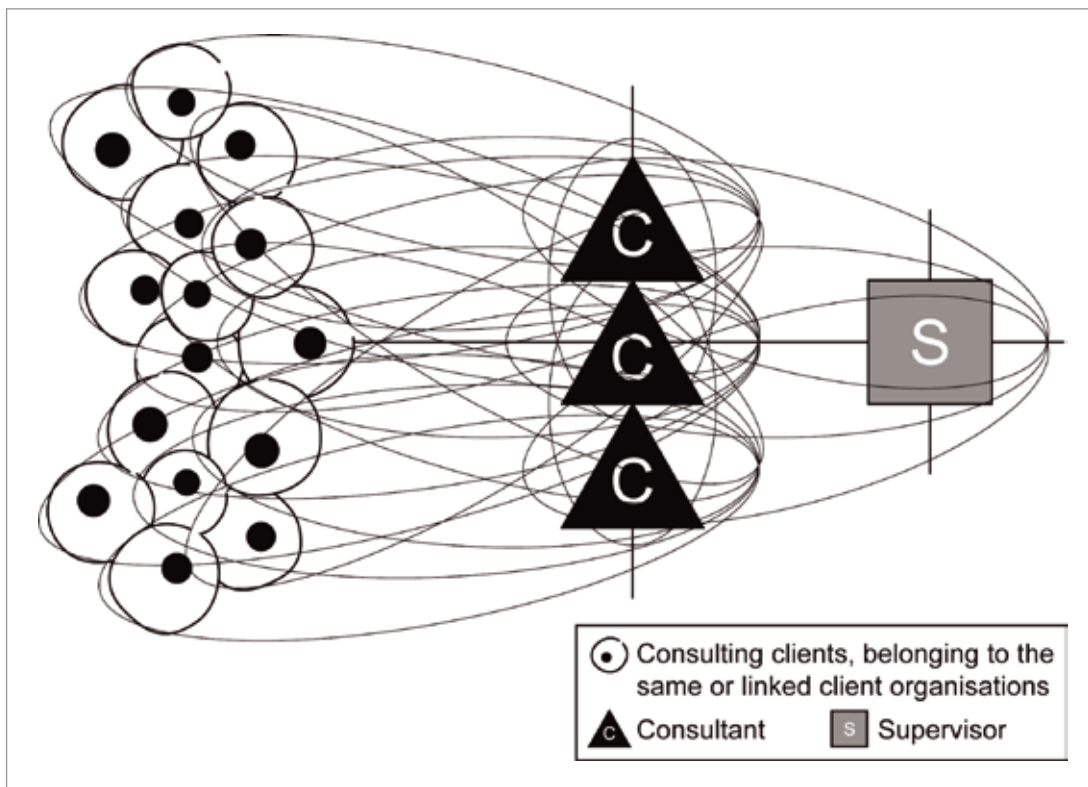

Fig. 2: Schematic depiction of 'shadow consultancy' supervision for a team of OD consultants working on a single assignment

⊙ Consulting clients, belonging to the same or linked client organisations

▲ Consultant   ⬛ Supervisor

An individual supervisor can pick up important determining patterns that are normally below the level of conscious awareness, but are within their specific and limited spectrum of valencies

Working actively as a *peer supervisor* within a consulting team This is when team members take it in turns to play the role of supervisor. The advantage of this approach is that the peer supervisor has his own direct experience of the client organisation, which means he can test certain hunches and ground them in the reality of his own experience. This may, however, compromise his ability to pick up on parallel processes.

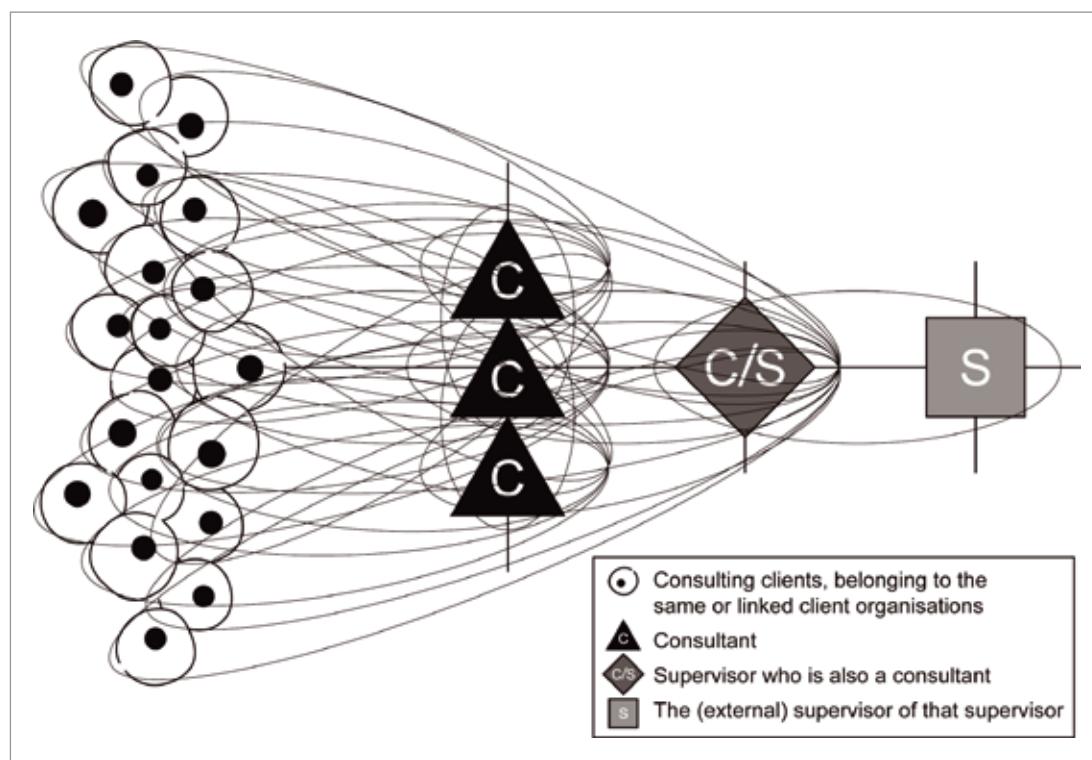For us, the most effective method of peer supervision involves the peer supervisor

remaining somewhat detached from the work of his supervisees, making time and space for the supervision meetings away from the client. It is particularly important for the group to establish a clear contract about the purpose and roles of supervision, including issues of confidentiality.

Case example
A team of 15 consultants working on a culture change project at a government department were grouped into five peer supervision groups, or 'trios'. Each trio met either face-to-face or via a teleconference once a fortnight, with colleagues taking it in turns to play the role of the supervisor. In one trio, a colleague was concerned about the management style of one of the senior client staff, which he felt was unnecessarily aggressive and bullying. With the help of his peer supervisor and the third member of the trio, he explored his reactions to the person, including his unacknowledged prejudice associated with the person's educational background. By expressing these feelings, he was able to empathise with the person and re-evaluate his critical stance. Rather than confront the person as he had been intending to, he decided that he would try to build a closer relationship with him and, if necessary, influence from a position of support and respect.

In peer supervision (Fig. 3 below), the supervisor has access to a still wider pattern of dynamics, including his own direct experience. The situation

Fig. 3: Schematic depiction of peer supervision for a team of OD consultants working on a single assignment

- ⊙ Consulting clients, belonging to the same or linked client organisations
- ▲ C Consultant
- ◆ C/S Supervisor who is also a consultant
- ■ S The (external) supervisor of that supervisor

is richer but also 'messier', as the supervisor may be less clear about what he is picking up. Some form of external supervision of the peer supervisors is particularly important as a means of grounding certain ideas and observations, and becoming aware of patterns that are no longer accessible.

The shadow consultant and peer supervisor can pick up patterns that are sometimes four layers deep: organisational patterns that may mirror in individual client behaviour; patterns in the relationship between consultant and client; patterns between consultants in the team; patterns directly experienced here and now by the supervisor. Having the free space offline and the supervisor attuned to patterns, many can be brought to the surface.

Dilemmas for consulting supervisors

Supervisors are frequently presented with dilemmas, many of which occur repeatedly with clients.

One very common dilemma concerns the supervisor's valency or counter-transference. Which feeling should be attended to by the supervisor and what should he do with it? He may become aware of his counter-transference without necessarily knowing what it is about: he may feel unease, discomfort, distraction, displaced anger, boredom, or other feelings that seem real but may actually be a manifestation of the client/ consultant dynamics experienced by the supervisee. In other words, we feel the sensation in our *antennae* before we can even begin to make sense of the signal. And if we attend to the sensation, we become aware of the inadequacy of our measuring equipment, which is so strongly entwined with our own unresolved issues and transferential patterns. This dilemma begins as discomfort, then emerges as a choice whether to attend, and may become a huge doubt about whether what we feel is of any use to our supervisees.

If we then move closer to reflecting back and communicating our observations, we can feel dilemmas about how direct we should be, or how tentative. Of most benefit to the client is usually to be *both*

- direct: concise, challenging and focused; and
- tentative: inviting reflections rather than opinions.

Furthermore, when addressing new client material, we may feel unsure about how to set the tone. Is it more useful to our clients, and ultimately to the organisation, to work in an emergent way, or is it important to map every aspect of the 'case' more actively, working rather like an expert consultant?

References

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3 Ledford G E Jr "Transference and counter-transference in action research relationships" *Consultation* 4.1 pp36-51 (1985
Searles H F "The informational value of the supervisor's emotional experience" *Psychiatry* 18 pp135-146 (1955)

4 De Haan E, Birch D "Quality control for coaches" *Training Journal* August 2010 pp71-74

5 Schroder M "The shadow consultant" *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 10.4 pp579-594 (1974)

6 Searles H F "The informational value of the supervisor's emotional experience" *Psychiatry* 18 pp135-146 (1955)

7 Hirschhorn L *The Workplace Within – Psychodynamics of Organizational Life* MIT Press (1988)

Similarly, we may have dilemmas around when supervision should be cerebral and technical and when we should work more in a 'playful' way, for example by recreating the organisation's dynamics in role play, 'two chair' work, psycho-drama or organisation constellations. These ways of working may provide a sharper lens on unconscious dilemmas within the client organisation, because it is harder for the supervisees to 'censor' their material.

Next, we have experienced dilemmas and concerns in terms of the role we play for the client organisations. Ultimately, the client organisation should be the main benefactor and the ultimate client of our work, but they are – usually – one step removed from the supervisory relationship. As supervisors, we have noticed that we struggled at times to be aware of our own engagement with the organisation. On the one hand, we know we need a certain level of detachment to work well but, on the other, we aim to have an impact on the consultants' client organisation.

Conclusion

In our view, these rich examples from practice demonstrate how consulting supervisors' personal valencies enable them to pick up a host of parallel processes. They show that consulting supervision is an exciting field capable of providing norms, learning and support for all those organisation consultants that are straddling the boundaries of organisations.

We are excited by the prospect of further development and professionalism of this field, so that it can take up its rightful place in the support and quality assurance of organisation consultants and expert consultants alike. **TJ**

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